

**WESTERN MONTANA'S 'last best' ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY****Submitted by Mike Powers / Libby Biomass Working Group**

We all know that our governor is chairperson of the Western Governor's Conference, and the Western Governors Conference was instrumental in developing the provisions of the Presidents Healthy Forest Initiative that just passed in the House of Representatives and is likely to pass in the Senate very soon.

What this means economically for Montana, with half of our state being timbered and the majority of that either owned by the federal government or the state, is economic opportunity, along with environmental action, which will safeguard our people and our property.

In Western Montana a little known grassroots effort by a group of volunteers has been developing an economic plan to address the chronic boom-bust-cycle of economic dependence on corporate whim. These volunteers are called the Libby Biomass Working Group. They have brought to their community a proposal that all of us in Montana should stop and think about for a moment. Here is why:

Within 50 miles of most towns in Western Montana there are over 3 million acres of trees. Those trees grow every year until either they are thinned or they die as fuel for Wildfire. We all know about the wildfires that we have seen in our state and across the West. Here is a glimpse of an innovative alternative offered by Libby.

By using modern technologies quite unlike what we have been used to in Montana and across America, we can thin our forests and use the defective trees and forest waste in ways we have never before used them. We are now able to economically make new products and to produce cheap energy while building a strong resource based foundation for economic recovery of our rural communities replete with good jobs, low cost energy as well as exportable products. These technologies can be used to support business incubators that encourage entrepreneurial, clean small businesses in the economically depressed rural communities all across Montana and the forested Western United States.

With one-hundred workers and the right tools and technology, small communities like Libby can start the process of protecting and revitalizing their communities by thinning their forested surroundings. The short-term results are safer communities, cleaner water and air, good jobs, economic development and civic pride. The longer-term results are reduction of wildfire conditions in the forest, community self-determination, sound local job structures and opportunities, a good tax base and adequate support of local schools and infrastructure.

Here are the numbers. With a core installation of conversion and manufacturing technology, 5,000 to 10,000 acres can be thinned in a very environmentally safe, responsible and clean manner each year. Potentially, an annual \$80 million may be generated from forest trash and waste from normal thinning and logging enterprises by the sale of energy and products created by the application of new biomass technologies. A net profit in the neighborhood of \$20 million per year could be realized while providing wages that average in the mid \$20 per hour range. This is with the first installation of the core technology. This can be expanded to larger annual capacity and

therefore greater earning power as fast as the forest managers can prepare additional acreage for thinning. The primary installation that makes this possible costs approximately \$100 million. Not a bad return?

The process includes only proven technologies; technologies and methods that seem to have been created just for the provisions of the Forest Initiative Bill. By using small, defective, and sub-merchantable trees, and the tops and limbs of other larger trees that must be removed, the parts that we have never before used, we can create from the proverbial grunt and squeal of the forest energy and new products whilst improving safety and restoring forest health. How could this have been missed for all these years, where fully one-third to one-half of all trees ever harvested in the Nations forests have been wasted, and worse yet, burned ignobly in smoldering slash piles all across the nation.

The products envisioned in the Libby model are quality products in high demand with proven markets and growing market strength. There is an education component to this as well, as workers would be trained in classrooms and on simulators to operate new kinds of equipment, to embrace new technologies, and to protect and to respect the forest. Greater use of computer technology and satellite communications is central to these technologies.

In the Libby model priority is given to what remains on the land and the condition of that land rather than what is taken from the land. The object is to restore the forest to health and to a low intensity fire character while supporting reasonable, sustainable local economic growth and wise utilization of forest resources.

Just the waste from the growth rate alone of the forests of Western Montana has the potential to provide the foundation for thousands of jobs, low cost energy, attractive byproducts, reduced risk of catastrophic fires, infrastructure, income for our troubled schools, and a sustainable responsible economic engine for the revitalization of our communities, not to mention billions of dollars in new revenue all from a renewable resource; one that has been traditionally wasted.

Clean air is a huge benefit of these new, clean technologies, and nowhere is that more important than in Libby with the attendant asbestos problem endemic there. Further, Libby, like many communities, is a non-attainment area for additional emissions and therefore dead to any additional industrial development without this new technology to replace the old dirty and obsolete technologies that have failed us. The emission standards will only get tighter, so these technologies will be even more important in the future.

The alternative, unfortunately, as it relates to our forestland, is to do nothing and let nature do the thinning by wild fire. We all know what that means death, disaster and destruction!! It is all up to you, our leaders.

This program proposal was developed by the Libby Biomass Working Group, which may be contacted by phone 406-293-6879, or by mail at 313 ½ California Ave., Libby, Montana 59923 (Mike Powers in the team coordinator of the Libby Biomass Working Group)